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ABSTRACT

Recent controversies about the quality of writing instruction in the nation's schools are examined in this paper. The first chapter summarizes articles in the news media that have pointed to a crisis in education and cites facts that lend support to an opposing view. Chapters two and three discuss conflicting responses from educators, state legislatures, and foundations in response to the charges and to public demands for education to get "back to the basics." The following three chapters offer insights into the historical background and political ramifications of the controversy and discuss future prospects for the teaching of English. The concluding chapter points to constructive reforms that should be considered by individual teachers, English departments, and the English profession. Appendixes show average Scholastic Aptitude Test scores from 1966 to 1975 and years of school completed by adults in 1940, 1950, 1960, and 1970, broken down according to race and sex. (GW)

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THE TEACHING OF WRITING AS A PERPETUAL CRISIS

by

Janis F. Molen

Masters Thesis

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Sonoma State University

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C H A P T E R

O N E

The Outcry in the Media

For the past three years, the media has focussed enormous attention on the quality of writing instruction now being offered in schools and colleges. This burst of concern for competence in verbal skills provoked hot debates not only within the profession but throughout governmental and foundation agencies as well. Known as the "Back to the Basics" movement, the controversy goes deeply into the underlying folk-myths about standards of attainment and moral behavior: things aren't what they were and young people are going to the dogs. Yet, underneath it all, there are perfectly respectable arguments about levels of achievement expected from students at different stages, and the methods and styles of teaching appropriate to these expectations.

A close look at the history of the teaching of composition, however, reveals that the writing crisis which we now perceive as a new and disturbing issue in reality exists only as the latest in a long series of quarrels which started, from all we know, as long as 5000 years ago when those first lines were scratched on a clay tablet somewhere north of Baghdad. We can at any rate gain a much better understanding of the present problem through examining our own recent past and come to a more informed perspective from which to judge the tenor of the battle.

The first real shot was fired by Time magazine in August of 1975: "Can't Anyone Here Speak English?" reported the "signals of a new brainlessness in public language that coincides with a frightening ineptitude for reading and writing among the young."[1] Relying for documentation on the quotes of a few English professors from prestigious universities ("The English language is dying, because it is not taught."), and on the decline in S.A.T. scores as evidence, the Time writer goes on to indict

as the causes of this new indifference to language television, Viet Nam, Watergate, bureaucratese, social sciences jargon, feminism, open admissions programs, overworked teachers, the throwaway mentality, and the replacement of Shakespeare by Woody Allen. This article actually does nothing more than register the changes currently taking place in the American language, stating them with some humor and much gnashing of teeth. Documenting a "frightening ineptitude for reading and writing among the young," it most certainly does not.

Four months later, Newsweek magazine, archrival of Time, accelerated the thrust of the argument by playing on general public anxiety on the state of education. Featuring a vivid, colored cover-page photograph of a struggling, bewildered student desperately trying to write a sentence, "Why Johnny Can't Write" essentially rehashes many of the Time writer's arguments (a crisis in writing is equivalent to a crisis in culture as we know it) and even quotes the same authors (Marshall McLuhan: "Literary culture is through."). Echoing and distorting Matthew Arnold's concept of culture and literature, this writer suggests that, "unless the educational establishment recaptures the earlier conviction that the written language is important," the culture's "ideas, values, and goals" will collapse.[2] Implicitly condemning the recent acknowledgement by the National Council of Teachers of English of the validity of the concerns voiced in street dialects, notably black colloquialisms, the writer calls for "some fixed rules, however tedious, if the codes of human communication are to remain decipherable." What is really at issue here is whether or not "every fresh dialect demands and gets equal sway."[3] Thus, the cry of dismay over the inadequacy of the teaching of writing skills masks

a much stronger fear: the assimilation of black culture into the American mainstream. The concluding statement seems to confirm this veiled animosity toward recent infusions of the expressions of minorities into this society: "...there are too many people intent on being masters of their language and too few willing to be its servants."[4]

The graphic illustrations which accompany the article demonstrate this implicit point: along with four large-type fragments from student papers fraught with spelling, usage, and grammatical errors, and a "Writer's Guide: What Not to Do," is included a comparison of three styles of expressing the same sentence from Hamlet's graveyard speech. The original, written by Shakespeare ("Alas! Poor Yorick. I know him...") is juxtaposed next to a Standard English version ("Poor Yorick! I really knew him...") and then finally, in a third column, next to a version called simply Dialect ("My man Yorick. We was real tight...").[5] The obvious suggestion that contemporary street language is inferior and WRONG shouts at the reader.

The particular article bears close scrutiny not only because it so clearly exploits public fears and appeals to regressive impulses but also because it is the most elaborate popular expression of the issue. Creativity and a concern for "correct" English are viewed as conflicting goals: "Even where writing still is taught, the creative school discourages insistence on grammar, structure and style. Many teachers seem to believe that rules stifle spontaneity." The writer then goes on to quote a professor from Northeastern University who "is inclined to think that these creative teachers have subverted their own goals."[6] Failing to mention that teachers have turned to "creative" methods

because the old prescriptive traditions of teaching composition by the "rules" never worked, the writer repeatedly supports the views of the "traditionalists" who scoff at the "idealistic" teachers and their support of the NCTE policy statement entitled "Students' Rights to their Own Language."

Two years later on Nov. 14, 1977, Newsweek ran a follow-up article on this topic. Written by an ostensibly bright, patient community college English instructor, this short piece stresses the need to maintain high academic standards--come what may. She expresses an attitude that students will be grateful for discipline so let them experience it as an indication of what the "real world" is like: "Poverty, ignorance and just plain orneriness will always abound. We look for every reason in the world for the declining test scores of our children, except for stupidity and laziness....I had to breathe on my own. So do we all."[7]

Harper's, appealing to a more educated audience, dealt with this controversy as a "flight from excellence" based on a "well-intentioned but inept concern with equality of opportunity."[8] This writer, the president of Boston University (an expensive, private institution), attacks the question of elitism as an anti-democratic, racist, and sexist stance. Maintaining the position that the policy of the NCTE to recognize the validity of dialectical variants of English is essentially patronizing, he argues that blacks will remain "tragecially isolated from the mainstream of their national culture, and pay the price for the ideological whims of whites."[9] Unlike the previous writers, he avoids the issues of "fixed rules," creative methods, laziness, and the sanctity of the "written word." Quoting U.S. Representative Barbara Jordan who calls for "policies which

would lead absolutely, categorically, and without hesitation, to the best this country has to offer," he simply defends the notion of high academic standards as a vision of excellence.[10]

We thus encounter much the same argument and conclusion as before. However, devoid of transparent racist slurs and condescending assumptions, the Harper's article forces us to respect the legitimacy of the logic of the position: yes, it is true that "lowered expectations are a threat to all students since their ability to develop is very largely dependent upon the goals we establish for them." But is that all there is to it?

Other media were quick to chime in on this slippery subject: the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, Saturday Review, Change, the Yale Alumni Magazine, and Reader's Digest explored the writing crisis in varying degrees of depth and length. All agreed that it was real and serious.

The statistics offered up as proof of the reality of the crisis were counterbalanced by others which supported the opposite view. Among those which supposedly documented the "new illiteracy," the most important and oft-quoted were the declines in S.A.T. and A.C.T. scores. Verbal scores on both tests had gone down since 1964 with the biggest drop in 1974.[11] Similar declines were reported on other tests. In addition, the National Assessment of Educational Progress Institute reported that in 1974, thirteen and seventeen year-olds wrote in a more "primer-like" style, with more run-on sentences and incoherent paragraphs than the same age groups in 1970.[12] Finally, in a large study run by the University of Texas supported by the U.S. Office of Education it was shown that only 49 per cent of people 18-29 years old have adequate command of the skills used in making a living and sustaining a household compared to 60 per

cent of those 30-39 years old.[13]

These damning citations usually were the only ones which appeared in most articles. However, those obscure writers who tried to consider both sides of the issue quoted the following statistics:

1. Preliminary S.A.T. scores were up between 1960 and 1966 and again between 1970 and 1972.
2. The NAEP study showed that the percentage of good writers among seventeen year-olds had gone up, that nine year-olds were better writers than their counterparts four years ago, and that all three age groups adequately handled basics--spelling, punctuation, agreement, usage, etc.
3. A Study by the American Institutes for Research showed a slight improvement in reading test scores for high school seniors between 1960 and 1970.
4. Educational Testing Service and the USOE sponsored a wide survey of reading test results in 1975. They found no evidence of a decline in reading ability and concluded: "We are now convinced that anyone who says he knows that literacy is decreasing...is at best unscholarly and at worst dishonest."
5. The NAEP study found that the functional literacy rate for seventeen year-olds increased from 88 to 90 percent between 1971 and 1974.[14]

Other studies appeared which suggested many more complex factors than those suggested by Time or Newsweek were at work:

1. From 1971 to 1973, enrollment of high school students in English courses dropped 11 per cent nationally, while absences from school

increased.

2. *In the same period, there were fewer high school dropouts. Thus, more students took the standard tests from a part of the pupulation who usually left school before their senior year.*
3. *The decline in ACT scores took place almost entirely among women. Between 1965 and 1975, women test-takers increased from 45 to 55 per cent. The researcher inferred that this means that young women are less excluded from education now than ten years ago: Many more are attempting college. Presumably, this new group is less well-prepared than the women who used to choose higher education. (The decline in literacy in this case actually translates into an increase in social justice.)*
4. *There is a well-established inverse correlation between standardized test scores and number of siblings. People reaching their teens now come on the average from larger families than their same age cohorts did 15 years ago--or will 15 years hence, providing a temporary change in literacy levels.*

In fact, the American educational system has rapidly expanded, continually admitting excluded groups to higher levels. Each time a new group becomes assimilated, another outcry is sounded. Since the sixties saw the most dramatic changes in history, the current commotion strikes us as the most vehement. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the median school years completed by persons 25 years old and over has shot up in the past few decades not only for blacks but for all groups. Between 1940 and 1950, the total increase in median school

years for all persons was only seven-tenths of one grade whereas between 1950 and 1960, 1.3 grades were added. Most significantly, between 1960 and 1970, 1.5 grades were added. Thus, 3.5 median school years were gained between 1940 and 1970.[16]

For blacks and other non-white races, an increase of 4.2 school years is shown between 1940 and 1970 with the greatest change of 1.8 years occurring between 1960 and 1970. When blacks are measured alone, 1.6 years increase are recorded in the same decade. (No statistics exist for just blacks in 1940). Furthermore, the number of blacks and other races who completed four or more years of college has increased seven and one half times since 1940 whereas the number of whites has gone up only just a bit more than three times. Thus, the increase in the social mobility of whites can be shown to be less than half that of blacks and other races.[17]

It cannot be denied that underneath the "Back to the Basics" movement is a continuing political argument over who shall be educated and what shall be the limits of equality in this country. As we move toward more comprehensive mass education and the number of completed school years continues to increase through open admissions policies, the demand for proofs of competence will probably be heard repeatedly. The mere number of completed school years has ceased to function as a measurement of elite status. Looming ever more significant as indicators of intelligence and socialization are the aptitude tests. The question of how these tests are written and what they measure becomes increasingly political. Whatever group ultimately determines what is essential or "basic" knowledge as evidenced in these tests holds the key

to social mobility in this country.

CHAPTER TWO

Responses from within the profession

At the heart of the "new illiteracy" debate rests much confusion over what to do with the new clientele in colleges with open admissions policies. Obviously, the pressure for more remedial training in writing mounts with more non-traditional, i.e., non-middle-class students. However, the nature of the verbal training received by traditional middle-class students has undergone significant change in the past ten years as a result of many of the same concerns which brought about the open admissions policies. In an attempt to heighten student motivation and avoid rigid stratification of ability groups, high schools have dropped the tracking systems which were developed over fifty years ago as a response to the development of the early IQ tests. Substituting elective programs for tracks, however, has also reduced the emphasis on the teaching of composition. With more options, students are less likely to choose composition courses--no matter how much they need them. Thus, upon admission to college, both groups of students display a great need for comprehensive writing courses.

A recent survey of English department chairmen carried on by the Modern Language Association and reported in the Chronicle of Higher Education discovered immense although not universal concern that "students are coming from high school with a far less firm grasp on fundamentals than before--middle-class as well as disadvantaged students." These chairmen also remarked that they felt English departments were not doing an adequate job of teaching these students how to write.[1]

An additional factor worth considering is the relaxation of composition requirements which has been taking place throughout the country: between 1967 and 1973 the proportion of colleges with no such requirements

rose from 6 to 24 per cent. However, with open admissions, some change became necessary. At City College of New York, the number of composition courses has increased from 30 to 50 per cent of the English department offerings. Michael Shugrue, dean of faculties at Richmond College of the City University of New York, suggests that only prestigious universities can and should function primarily as literature departments. The others which continue to stress literature "are going to face further retrenchment."[2]

In October of 1975, the College Entrance Examination Board, together with the Educational Testing Service, appointed a special, outside "advisory panel" to investigate the reasons for the drop in SAT scores among 1975 graduates. The CEEB president, Signey P. Marland, discounted the popular explanations that the test was too biased toward minority groups or that the increase in economically disadvantaged students taking the test brought down the national average. Noting that the number of such students was too small in relation to the total group tested to have a substantial effect, Marland pointed out that the depression of the averages is caused by both more lower scores and fewer higher ones. Although he could offer several contributing factors, he charged that public reaction had unfairly blamed the public-school system: "To single out the schools as being responsible for the decline is unwarranted, unfair, and scientifically unfounded."[3]

In February of 1977, the CEEB announced that two measures of writing ability will be added to the all-objective format of the SAT: a twenty minute centrally graded essay and a short answer test of standard written English. Marland explains this action as a means "to provide

encouragement and support to English teachers and to the secondary schools which are trying to improve students' writing skills."[4]

Thus, we find ourselves in a situation in which the experts with access to the best data claim that a decline in literacy cannot be substantiated and even if it could, the schools are not to blame--but, just in case, they are beefing up their composition proofs.

An army of bewildered apologists and grim-faced defenders has since rushed to the fore to interject their explanations and solutions for the writing crisis. Administrators and faculties have responded by tightening admission and graduation requirements. In the fall of 1977, the New Jersey board of higher education voted to require all students entering the state's public colleges to pass basic-skills tests in language (and mathematics). Believed to be the first action affecting an entire state system this requirement will be used only to determine which students should be enrolled in remedial programs--not to screen out poorly prepared students before admission.[5]

In October of 1977, the Regents of the University of California, by a margin of 13 to 12, approved a controversial proposal to tighten admission requirements for entering freshmen. Under these new provisions, the university will rely more on standardized test scores and less on grades to determine admission. In addition, the university will also require that applicants take a fourth year of high school English and additional achievement tests. The president of the university, David S. Saxon, explains the change came about as a result of "a decline in the quality of preparation of incoming freshmen" and that he was

"determined to do something about it." Although he denied that the university was reducing its commitment to minority-group students, a study made at the request of the regents showed that a disproportionate number of minority students would be affected.[6]

Governor Brown chimed in with his perception of the real reason for the change: "administrative convenience." He added that he would find a way to increase minority enrollments if the tighter standards resulted in decreases. The governor himself opposed the "mechanical tests" because they don't reveal the "spark of creativity" which "identifies those citizens who should enroll in the university." Although Brown favors written essays over standardized tests as entrance exams, he admits the difficulty of judging 13,000 essays: "The university can't cope with a personal way of doing things."[7]

On February 28, 1978, the faculty of the College of Letters and Science at UC Berkeley approved a return to the tougher breadth requirements in math and foreign languages dropped a few years ago following two years of revision and public review. The ASUC Academic Affairs Vice-President Mark Courtney suggested that this new policy is not the result of deficiencies in breadth requirements but rather caused by "the need to buttress enrollment in undersubscribed departments."[8] A proposal for more stringent requirements in natural science, humanities and social science was tabled by the faculty for at least two weeks.

Individual English teachers on both the high school and college level quickly began to fill the pages of their professional journals, advocating various positions on the "Back to the Basics" movement. Unlike the college instructors, the high school teachers frequently acquiesced

to the charges. One agreed that a decline had not only occurred but that it had been "steady and cumulative," hoping that school boards and administrators would lighten the work load of struggling composition teachers trying to cope with 180 students in six classes per day.[9] Another concurred that "these angry tirades are largely correct: but objected that the "basics" never were taught, that teachers have substituted "stroking" for teaching, and that the most important facet of the writing crisis is simply its display of the "erosion of will among teachers."[10]

Without exception, college English teachers have refused to cower. Indeed, they were horrified by the uproar, demanding to know "what are the basics?" and who "determines what is basic and non-basic?" Offended primarily by the anti-intellectualism of the movement, Ken Donelson of Arizona State University calls on members of the profession to realize the importance of the "basics" drive in that it supplies "simplistic answers to a difficult problem."[11] Dale T. Adams of Lee College (Baytown, Texas) defends the practices and methods of teaching writing developed in the past few years (such as "rhetorical stance" and "generative rhetoric") and call on composition teachers to avoid at all costs the "counterproductive proscriptions, prescriptions, and pet peeves that bear little resemblance to the students' observations of the real world...."[12]

This relativistic approach to grammatical rules became greatly expanded by Thomas J. Farrell of St. Louis Community College in an article entitled "Literacy, the Basics, and All That Jazz." Intellectual rather than mechanical competence should be the most basic goal of English instruction according to Farrell. Contrasting oral and literate cultures

and the types of mentality they produce, he argues that students should be encouraged to develop a fully mature reading and writing style which will enhance their conceptual abilities and awarenesses. Farrell recommends that the strongest emphasis must be on fluency and developing ideas in detail with instruction in organization and other rhetorical considerations coming after fluency has become well established.[13]

Elizabeth Wooten Cowan of Texas A & M University objects to the flight from complexity reflected in the "basics" mentality. Quarreling with the premise that the teaching of functional rather than conceptual skills will prove successful in this decade, she warns of the danger of a drive which both "haloes the past in an aura of reverence that neither history nor research substantiates" and defines the future "in terms which limit rather than expand the development of knowledge."[14] Cowan identifies the heart of the current problem to be the absence of a sound and broad philosophy and theory which consolidates past practices and encourages verification, application, and extension:

> We need to know how to include grammar in our course so that students learn it; we need to know what aspects of rhetoric contribute to what modes of expression and how these are best taught. We need to be able to provide, in appropriate proportion and perspective, the mechanics of edited speech, and we need to know how to do this with success instead of frustration. Sadly, the automatic assumptions of "back to the basics" provide neither an impetus for research nor a climate for experimentation.[15]

Reiterating the simple-minded nature of the "basics" answer, Dean Memering of Central Michigan University dryly assetts that "our most reliable research denies that skill-drilling has ever worked in the past" and, in fact, the history of composition teaching offers little guidance save as a "morose compendium of things tried and abandoned and

tried again." He points out the truth in Walker Gibson's remark that: "The composition teacher, as everyone knows, is underpaid and unappreciated; he can show no respectable theory; his discipline boasts no scholarship but is planned by dolts, manned by drudges, and avoided if possible by everyone." However, having admitted that all the venerable approaches do not work, that students can't be "grammared" into better writers, that indeed grammar gets in the way, Memering delightfully announces that there is something "basic" to be done in composition: "rescue the sentence from linguists" and elevate it to the importance it held in classical times. Although he fails to describe exactly how a "literary and rhetorical appreciation of the sentence" will nurture "fluency, maturity and artistry of expression," there is no question but that he advocates this approach as the only possible redemption for writing teachers.[16]

An associate professor of English at Yale University, Paula Johnson conducted her own local research into the "basics" which she affectionately terms "my Yale tale." The moral to this tale is: "people don't stay convinced for very long that the present basis is satisfactory."[17] She relates the never-ending changes in English curricula experienced by Yale students since the late nineteenth century and concludes that "the plurality of bases, in the sense of syllabi, suggests that the hypothetical fabric has become less uniform as the terrain has become more uneven." In other words, one has to determine curriculum based on the real needs of actual students of today, whatever that means. Johnson resents the imposition of current

political distortions into the lives of students, labeling such as "clouds of ideological dust and foys of professorial doublespeak."[18] The only way out, she suggests, and the only way to hope to have anything but a politics of back to basics is to "figure out where we really are" and stop making choices degrading to both students and teachers. Unfortunately, she never specifies just what she means in terms of concepts or methods.

More straightforward in her recommendations, Elisabeth McPherson of Forest Park Community College zeroes in on the political issues underlying the "basics" movement, pointing out clearly that to go backwards, undoing all the progress of the last decade or so, would be to say again that education is for the elite:

> Working with students who are already almost educated would certainly make our job easier: that's why there's always a scramble for the honors sections, and why professors with tenure have "graduated" from the labor of teaching composition. But taking that step backward would make a farce of our boasted "equal" educational opportunity for all. The students who need it most would be shut out again, and although nobody says it in quite those words, that's what's likely to happen; higher education will be used as a sieve to see that the "have's" stay safely sorted from the "have not's."[19]

McPherson delineates her own version of "basics" which reflects her astute political judgment: to read with discrimination (recognizing unsupported generalizations); to detect racism and sexism in language; to recognize distortion in reading and avoid it in writing (unless aware of it); to understand the emotional impact language can have and the ways in which people judge others by the language choices they make; to remember that reading and writing, at their best, are ways of sharing meaningful experiences with other people; and finally, to take pleasure in reading and writing. These, she observes, are genuine "basics" which will "move our culture closer to what we claim it should be."[20]

Even more outraged, Richard Ohmann, a professor of English at Wesleyan University and editor of College English, lashes out at what he perceives as the pernicious idiocy of the "basics" movement. Furious over the political implications of it, he labels the present eruption of concern a "cloud of mystifications" designed to force a definition of the problem as one of "verbal manners, the performance of college students, and a deterioration of standards" demanding the obvious solution of stricter grading and tougher standards for admission and advancement. What is really going on, he says, is a "pressure to make this branch of education more mechanical, less humanistic, more class-bound, and less critical." To the extent this pressure succeeds, he warns, then "my profession will have lost a skirmish in the battle over precisely those values it holds to be most important."[21] Wryly noting that Time and Newsweek displayed no interest whatsoever in a study conducted at the University of Texas on functional literacy which showed that one American adult in five is functionally illiterate and another large group is incapable of understanding such things as the concept of an equal-opportunity employer and the law against detaining an arrested person without bringing charges, Ohmann displays no surprise. Instead, he poses a different set of questions:

> What would it take by way of social change to create full literacy? Why isn't this happening? Do those who control our economic and educational systems really want a totally literate work force, given that there are too few jobs to go around, and too few intelligent jobs for the literate and capable workers that now exist? And do they really want the most exploited people in America to command the skills of thought, speech, writing, and organization that are considered so essential for students at Yale and Berkeley?[22]

There are numerous other articles bearing many additional relevant comments and questions of value such as the fact that writing as a scholarly discipline has never been respectable in this century and the merit of various rhetorical theories and so forth. However, this litany of observations can only go on so long before it becomes painfully repetitious. It should be clear that there is not even a hint of agreement on what is basic other than it is not what Time and Newsweek suggest it to be. Suffice it to say that an extraordinary amount of verbage has been generated by this controversy. It is perhaps more important to stress the fact that the great bulk of Americans read only the inflammatory remarks of those two magazines and virtually none of the far more thoughtful and informed responses from within the profession. Moreover, since the only articulate voice these readers possess is their vote on election day, it is the Time and Newsweek mentality which shapes the responses of our legislators to the issue.

CHAPTER THREE

Responses of Government Agencies and Foundations

Ever alert to changes in the quickening pulse of America Jimmy Carter on February 28, 1978, asked Congress for the largest increase in federal educational aid since the program was created. Why? Appearing himself to announce the $4 billion or 24 per cent increase, Carter specified that the proposal "will focus our nation's resources on helping our children master the basic skills--reading, writing and arithmetic" because "we must do a better job of teaching these basic skills to all our children."[1] To his credit, Carter earmarked most of the funds for the instruction of low-income families. This particular proposal is now winding its way through Congress with great difficulty.

By 1976, fifteen states passed legislation which established standards of minimum competence in secondary schools. In 1977, eight more put forth bills which have now either passed or are still pending. All in all, the legislation emerges as very uneven: some states set graduation requirements; some created tests to identify problem students; some define competence in terms of academic achievement, others in terms of "survival skills"; some establish statewide standards, others call for local standards. In general, these expressions of the need for some set of competence standards in the basic skills reflect confusion about the aims of instruction: again very little agreement exists on how the standards should be determined. Nevertheless, schools and states are being forced to make decisions with very little substantiated information available on which to base those decisions.

The California State Legislature has so far offered two bills on this subject, both in the Assembly: AB 3408 (Hart) which has since become

law, and AB 2589 (Suitt). Assemblyman Gary Hart, a former high school teacher, introduced his "Pupil Proficiency Law" with two goals in mind:

1. To create a public dialogue and systematic accountability at the local level regarding the skills high school graduates should possess.
2. To encourage schools to focus attention on students who have difficulty mastering reading, writing or mathematics skills.

In his explanation of the law, Hart refers to a recent Gallup Poll on Public Attitudes Toward Education in which to the question "What do you think would do most to improve the quality of public school education overall?". A majority of citizens ansered: "Devote more attention to teaching basic skills." Another question asked: "Should all high school students in the United States be required to pass a standard nationwide examination in order to get a high school diploma? Sixty-five per cent responded with "yes." Hart's conclusion: "Clearly, many believe the schools should do more to assist students to master basic skills."[2]

The implementation of AB 3408 includes an assessment of students' abilities, at least once in the junior high school years and twice in grades ten through eleven, to determine whether each student is meeting the required standards. If not, principals arrange a conference with the teacher, student, and parents to discuss the problem and find solutions. Starting in July of 1980, school districts are not to award a high school diploma to any student who has not met the locally determined proficiency standards. In addition, the State Department of Education is required to provide by February 1, 1978 an "assessment framework" to help districts develop their local standards and procedures. Hart expects individual communities to foster a consensus concerning which skills are necessary

and at what level standards should be set. Nowhere does Hart suggest exactly what the "basics" are but he does not rule out conceptual skills: "We need objective standards for achievement in the basic skill areas, but competency-based instruction should not be implemented at the expense of flexibility, of creativity, and of innovation." He adds: "AB 3408 is not meant to encourage school districts to collapse the curriculum or abandon creative approaches to learning."[3]

Introduced on February 23, 1978, AB 2589 (Suitt) requires among other things, elementary instruction in English to include "knowledge of, and appreciation for literature and the language, as well as the skills of speaking, reading, listening, spelling, handwriting, and composition."[4] At the secondary level, the curricular demands are the same minus handwriting and spelling. In addition, very specific requirements are laid out: "one academic year of language arts in which English composition shall have major emphasis." In order to assure that "all pupils in the high schools of this state receive full and thorough instruction in English composition, which by its nature is significantly more time consuming than other courses of instruction," three working conditions for teachers are described in detail:

1. In classes of not more than 20 pupils.
2. By certificated employees who instruct no less than two periods of English composition per day and no more than a total of four periods per day in all subjects; and
3. Without increasing the student-teacher ratio in any other classes.[5]

If the Suitt bill is passed, it will complement the provisions of

Hart's Pupil Proficiency Law in a very necessary and important way: by receiving strong emphasis in composition training, students will experience far greater ease in passing the standardized competency tests of their last two years of high school. Otherwise, to impose a new straitjacket of examinations and tests and the threat of being refused a diploma on students could seriously damage the quality of life in high schools without raising the quality of teaching. The Suitt bill provides a realistic and enlightened approach to the perennial problem of the crushing conflict teachers always experience between an overwhelming work load and the need to offer students personal attention.[6]

Foundation response to the writing crisis appears mixed: having funded a year's study of ways to support programs to improve students' writing skills, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation decided last November to abandon its search. Disappointed with the lack of new ideas offered for improving writing, the foundation officials noted that whenever teachers are confronted with the problem, they blame someone else. Among the villains cited are large classes, unsympathetic administrators, poor textbooks, apathetic students, unconcerned parents, and incompetent school boards. A close observer bluntly described what happened: "The foundation said, 'Tell us what to do,' and the profession said, 'We don't know.' So the foundation is dropping the idea."[7] *The problem for the foundation boils down to a situation in which teachers not only cannot agree on how to approach the difficult issue of poor writing, they also can't even agree on what constitutes "good writing." For the teaching profession, on the other hand, the problem is one of inadequate*

financing of education: if society wants a solution of student writing riddles, "society had better be prepared to pay the bill"[8] In a resolution adopted by the South Atlantic Association of Departments of English, they make their position clear:

> Because reading and writing can no more be adequately taught in class situations than football, piano, or any other individual skill, and because of the increasing tendency for state legislatures and other extramural bodies to mandate teaching loads and class size, it is hereby resolved that no teacher of college composition in a 2-year college, 4-year college, or university be allowed to teach more than 50 composition students per week, nor be asked to make preparations for more than two different classes per week.[9]

In general, the response from foundations has so far appeared lackluster: curious but not bold. A Carnegie Corporation official participated in the Urbana Conference on Competence in English in February of 1977. This conference was supported by the College of Education of the University of Illinois and designed to deal with general issues of measurement. This major effort of the educational establishment to finally define the "basics" brought forth recommendations which represent at least some feeling for consensus and might offer a guideline for teachers, administrators, legislators, and the general public. Students, according to this group, should be capable of the following skills at the end of secondary school:

1) Follow a set of written instructions which require students to write.
2) Produce written communication that can inform a reader.
3) Produce written communication that might persuade a reasonable person.
4) Produce written communication that adheres to the conventions of spelling, punctuation, and usage.
5) Demonstrate the ability to discern, if not to produce, some of the major persuasive uses of language.[10]

Given these definitions of expectations, other parameters of competence were also established:

1) *Competence in writing should be demonstrated through actual writing performance.*
2) *Competence in writing should be demonstrated in a variety of contexts.*
3) *The conventions of writing vary from situation to situation so that competence in adhering to conventions must be viewed as situational. In other words, a measure of competence should avoid the picayune.*[11]

As a follow-up on the definition of the "basics," the conference also determined specific test recommendations and established nine major questions of research that should be answered which then in turn forced them to deal with two fundamental issues, one of them political and the other economic. The political problem deals with the matter of linguistic diversity and, on this question, they hedge. In areas of the country where students could be expected to be more proficient in a language other than English, they suggest that "it might be advisable to have a test in that other language, but (they) also realize that pragmatically a student finishing secondary school needs to have acquired some mastery of English in order to function in the broader society." The economic question ramains even more thorny: "a cheap test may well be invalid and a valid test may very well be prohibitive in cost."[12] *They failed to come up with any ready answers to these central issues.*

CHAPTER FOUR

Historical Perspectives

Since one of the primary tenets of the "Back to the Basics" movement is its awesome deference to the teaching methods of the past, a hard look at the development of English as a discipline must be undertaken. In fact, what emerges is a series of "basics" movements compared to which this latest one appears rather humdrum.

In Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History, Arthur N. Applebee offers a comprehensive view of the evolution of what is actually a very young academic discipline. It was only in 1876 that the first American Ph.D. in English literature was awarded to Robert Grant at Harvard. In 1883, when the MLA was organized, a mere 39 teachers of English existed among the 20 leading colleges. However, by 1900, major universities in all sections of the country were offering graduate degrees in English and at the undergraduate level, literature had become an almost universal offering.[1]

The "basics" or early elements of instruction in English grew out of a fruitful alliance of several distinct traditions which were finally consolidated under the term "English": the ethical tradition which combined moral and cultural concerns in a didactic form for elementary schools; the classical model which emphasized rhetoric and oratory and was taught in secondary schools and colleges; and the non-academic tradition of "appreciation" found in debating societies, literary societies, and finishing schools.

The ethical tradition, of course, reveals the longest history: reading and religious instruction were firmly linked together since the Council of Mainz in 813. The New England Primer, introduced about 1686, contained besides the letters of the alphabet, various religious and instructional pieces heavy with moral lessons. Indeed, the most

literary selection offered was the famous child's prayer beginning, "Now I lay me down to sleep." After about one hundred years, religous dogma faded in the wake of the country's need to instill a common cultural and national spirit among the disparate colonial states. In 1783, Noah Webster brought out his Blue-Backed Speller which included alphabet, primer, speller, and reader written in a didactic style on an adult level. In 1795, he also introduced An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking featuring materials chosen for patriotic content, ethical emphasis, and usefulness in the development of the speaking voice. Other texts published within the next 35 years continued to stress literary quality: even excerpts from Shakespeare appeared in Pierpont's series (1820-1830). However, it was this very emphasis on aesthetic content which provoked the first "basics" drive in mid-century. In reaction, The Christian Reader (made up wholly of tracts and hymns) and the Farmer's Schoolbook, with selections on "Making and Preserving Cheese," "Raising Calves," and The Nature of Manure," were produced. Only after "long and vituperative debate" was literature allowed to resurface again in the 1880's as the accepted means of teaching reading. McGuffey's readers then came to enjoy almost universal use, and consisted of fragments and precis of the works of American and European authors.[2]

Most interesting in the context of today's "basics" movement was the classical tradition: based on the pedagogical theory of mental discipline, it held that the aim of education was to exercise and train the mental faculties, especially the "memory" and "reason." A subject was valued in direct proportion to the degree of internal structure it exhibited, i.e., rules. Since the classical languages sported complex

vocabularies and rules of syntax, they were considered eminently respectable. English was just too simple, according to the classicists: it had no substance, theory or rules. They complained that it consisted of "mere chatter about Shelley." The learning of rules and their practical application being necessary, those who first attempted formal study of English just grafted the extensive methodology of classical language virtually intact onto the study of English grammar. It seemed perfectly logical. According to Applebee, this is where sentence analysis and diagramming, the learning of paradigms and the correction of "errors" together with rote memorization of definitions and rules for various grammatical categories all entered into the teaching of English. English grammar as such was then offered in most American schools by 1810.[3]

Along with the prescriptive tradition of language instruction grew the studies of rhetoric and oratory. In addition to the syntax rules and morphology of the grammarians, the rhetoricians emphasized "expression," that is, diction, style, figurative language, and the "flowers of rhetoric." They also maintained their prescriptive rules and examples of "errors"--all based on the English translation of classical texts. It was these studies which were the first to win acceptance at the college level even though they were considered a minor aspect of preparation for the clergy: Harvard established its Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory in 1806 with John Quincy Adams as the first incumbent.[4]

Since it boasted no rigorous methodology, the non-academic tradition of the appreciation of English literature for pure pleasure did not enter the college curriculum until after 1870. Instead, the debating and literary societies supported by students provided the only contemporary

literary fare available. The attitude was: there is no reason to teach literature, it should be simply read and enjoyed on one's own. Since women were assumed to lack the "mental discipline" necessary to handle the rigors of classical studies, they were allowed to dabble in literature far in advance of the male students. It is thus no surprise that many early English textbooks were designed for "young ladies" and prepared by schoolmasters in girls' finishing schools.[5]

The embryonic discipline of English which eventually combined these three traditions fell victim to yet another ongoing "basics" thrust throughout the nineteenth century. The notion that imaginative literature posed not only a threat to the moral well-being of its readers, but that it provided fearsome models of corruption had to be overcome. Opposition to drama remained the strongest: in 1828, a Boston teacher was dismissed for reading an excerpt from Shakespeare's plays! Even in 1893, the New England Journal of Education lent editorial support to a class refusing to read Shakespeare: "All honor to the modest and sensible youths and maidens of the Oakland High School who revolted against studying an unexpurgated edition of Hamlet!"[6]

Such an attitude might have endured far longer had not Matthew Arnold's concept of culture as the cumulative vision of mankind come into vogue. This new vision, Arnold held, would supply a new principle of authority to replace the eroding bonds of class and religion. Even though "culture" was very broadly defined, Americans embraced it as a means of stemming the erosion of traditional values. By turning to pastoral, detached literature, the country could, in the 1880's, suppress the vivid visions of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and industrialization still haunting them. With the help of Horace Scudder, Arnold's most

famous American spokesman, this idea of "culture" was used as a means to engender "spiritual grace," or, in other words, to provide badly needed acculturation for millions of new, poor, exploited immigrants.

However, no matter how valuable literature studies might prove in political terms, the teaching of grammar and rhetoric remained the dominant focus in instruction in English. In order to adopt literature into the college curricula, a rigorous methodology similar to those of grammar and rhetoric was necessary. Conveniently, philology, which was described by its popularizer Frederich Wolf at the University of Gottingen as a means to formulate the "biography of a nation" filled the gap. Anxious to strengthen German nationalism after the 1870 war with France, German philologists studied German grammar, criticism, geography, political history, customs, mythology, literature, art and ideas--not for their own sake but rather to find in Germanic culture the remnants of an earlier Indo-European culture and language. Looking for their "roots" in an ancient oral culture, they also finally moved closer and closer to more contemporary literature. The same process was then adopted by those in English studies: first, the Anglo-Saxon poets, then Chaucer, later Spenser and Shakespeare and finally, by 1900, the whole modern field. Thus, the awe of the past led into a recognition of the present.[7]

The next major "basics" movement occurred between 1910 and 1919. By this time, the cause of "culture" had come to be condemned as "vague, high-sounding hopes and aspirations." "Scientific management" which had delivered and delighted the American business world was adopted as

a solution to all the nation's ills: after 1910, schools were perceived as costing too much and producing too little.

This was the heyday of "objective measurement": IQ tests, successful as placement devices in the army during World War I, were taken over by the educational establishment in the hopes of promoting "efficient" instruction. As tools to determine tracking procedures, these tests exerted enormous influence until they were dropped recently under pressure from minority groups. In 1915, the Department of Superintendance of the National Education Association appointed a Committee on Economy of Time in Education which attempted to define the "minimum essentials" of the school curricula. Anything easily measured, or functional skills rather than conceptual abilities, became emphasized in order to take advantage of the burgeoning scientific methodology at hand. Franklin Bobbitt, professor of educational administration at the University of Chicago, gave first priority to the teaching of language skills, second priority to social concerns (citizenship), and third priority to literature in his list of 821 "educational objectives."[8] The head of the committee, Sterling Leonard, published in 1932, a study of Current English Usage. An updating of verbal construction rules, it suggested that many "incorrect" usages were actually acceptable. Two other works resulted from this movement which reshaped composition teaching: Albert H. Marckwardt and Fred Walcott's Facts about Current English Usage (1938) and Charles C. Fries' American English Grammar (1941).[9] Thus, the ultimate positive effect of this movement was to eliminate from the teaching of language skills the antiquated rules which had come to

this series of events parallels the earlier embrace of "culture" as a means of "spiritualizing" and therefore de-fusing unruly social forces. Again we see a movement away from content and toward form or style, from social criticism and toward aesthetic criticism. This particular shift of focus did not address the teaching of composition in any very specific way. Instead, the motivating force behind the movement concentrated on what should not be taught in English classes, namely militant social attitudes.

In the mid-fifties, another strikingly similar series of events took place. Reacting against the "life adjustment" emphasis of the progressive movement originally inspired by John Dewey, a new group which was later known as the Academic Critics came to the fore. Apalled by the lack of intellectual content in the student-centered teaching of the progressives or "educationists," these reformers produced such works as Albert Lynd's Quackery in the Public Schools, Arthur Bestor's Educational Wastelands, Robert Hutchins' The Conflict in Education, and Paul Woodring's Let's Talk Sense about Our Schools. Hitting a little below the belt, Rudolf Flesch in Why Johnny Can't Read subtly linked progressivism and communism.[13] This burst of solicitude for literacy finally erupted in 1956 in a Council on Basic Education.

No wonder that when Sputnik was launched in the fall of 1957, it was hailed as the symbol of the failure of American schools. Vice-Admiral H.G. Rickover in Education and Freedom (1958) touted high academic standards as the road to salvation. Congress responded with the National Defense Education Act almost immediately. A new focus on the intellectually gifted student took hold: honors lists advanced courses with

specified prerequisites, more emphasis on composition, and demands for four years of high school English were the results. In English courses, textual analysis and literary criticism on the model of the New Critics was stressed with very little attention given to the philosophical or ethical dimensions of literature.[14]

As a reflection of renewed scholarly interest in high school English, the Ford Foundation sponsored a series of "Basic Issues" conferences during 1958 which were dominated almost entirely by college English professors. Maintaining an attitude that whatever was good for the best students had to be good for everyone, the conferees all but forgot the weaker students. They advocated the teaching of traditional, sophisticated writers, exclaiming: "What a foundation for students entering college!" and "...what a challenge to those who are not!"[15] The Canadian literary scholar, Northrup Frye, provided this new drive with a comprehensive theory on which to base revision of curricula: a set of structuring principles which could be discussed at increasingly difficult levels. The professors of English dominant at this time stressed not so much the mechanics of grammar, etc. as the rhetorical devices of language. Genre classification, the semantic uses of diction and grammar, persuasive devices: these comprised the delights of academic critics. Questions of subjective response and social commentary were deliberately skirted.[16]

By the end of the sixties, the oversights of these innovators became glaring. With the exodus of Southern blacks into Northern cities and the consequent flight of whites into the suburbs, new educational inadequacies were felt: the bulk of the student population was simply

not academically ambitious. Instead, they exhibited pragmatic goals and a fear of academic failure. In this era of social upheaval, "relevance" became the catchword: vast numbers of young people who had been neglected during the "academic" period began to express their alienation from education in a celebration of non-form, embracing feeling over intellect, advocacy over docility, and fluidity over structure.

In response, the educational establishment once more discovered student-centered curricula, as reflected in pass-fail grading, expanded elective programs, and "advocacy" courses. Emphasis on content greatly overshadowed that on form or discipline. But with the re-assertion of personal and social values came a diminishing of stress on mechanical language skills. The object was simply to encourage academically hostile and unprepared students to write, to contribute anything on a page. Teachers praised fluency and tried to correct usage errors in the context of an emotionally supportive atmosphere. The declining enrollment which resulted with the waning of the baby boom intensified the need to please the student: grade inflation surfaced as a means for teachers to retain students and therefore steady employment.

This situation emerges as the provocation of the current basics movement: another cultural search for form, structure, and methodology in the face of an avalanche of content and formlessness. The need for hard data and tangible theories now appears urgent. Open admissions policies, a gift of the expansive sixties, suddenly seem extravagant in the late seventies; creative, innovative methods of teaching writing which stress fluency over structure seem misguided, even excessively idealistic. The cry is heard for subject matter-centered instruction

much in the same note that it was sounded in the early fifties: learning instead of lollipops. Finally, the search for the gifted student is once more renewed: "The truly brilliant scholar is an ever decreasing commodity..." remarked a dean of admissions in 1975.[17]

We are not alone. Britain now finds itself in the throes of the same hot issue: with increasing democratization of education, the question of standards has already touched off a lively commotion. Instead of open admissions, they maintain "comprehensive" secondary schools which admit far more students than the "grammar" schools with more selective standards. Certain politicians have claimed that these comprehensive schools lower standards generally. Also the University Grants Committee has voiced concern that students now lack basic skills. The chairman of this committee, Sir Fred Dainton, noted that, "Even Oxford University had noticed that some students were not up to the standards expected."[18] The chairman of governors at Manchester Grammar School, however, did a study in 1975 to check "to what extent the statistical evidence so far available does or does not support" claims of politicians. The results showed that, yes, it is true that comprehensive schools now contain a greater proportion of lower-ability children than in 1965 but the comprehensive sector is improving its performance at a faster rate than the selective sector and thus is actually raising standards.[19] The University Grants Committee issued a report on their findings indicating that the politicians are focussing on the wrong issue: "There was some concern about the decline in general competence in written English but this has not reached serious proportions. Universities cannot

simply hinder the learning of writing.

During the depression, another type of "basics" drive loomed on the horizon. Called the social reconstructionists, a group of English teachers with a strong sense of mission and a fervent belief in the benevolent power of education, preached a doctrine of radicalization as a means to achieve social progress and reform. Even the president of NCTE adopted this view:

> ...it lies especially in the province of English instruction, by a program of reading and discussion, to develop a feeling of world solidarity and to create better international understanding.[10]

At the same time, the NCTE Committee on International Understanding was zealously organizing members in the cause of peace. The council announced that it would co-sponsor with the NEA "the peace movement in the schools." Besides journal articles and convention sessions, the NCTE adopted its very first resolution supporting a peace crusade on which "the future of the world depends."

Reaction swiftly followed. John J. DeBoer, editor of English Journal and long a supporter of the peace movement in the schools, warned of the insidious influences of pressure groups. In his 1934 NCTE presidential address, Oscar J. Campbell reiterated this concern: "The greatest danger in such a time as ours is that one's mind may be completely captured by the immediate and pressing....Our duties in a rapidly changing world can best be discharged if we remain cognizant of the nature of our subject and of those deeper regions of personality to which it brings life and energy."[12] Back to the basics in this case meant away from politics and social action and back to the introspective, quiet speculation possible in writing and literature. In some ways,

continue to make economies without damaging academic standards. Freezing jobs, stopping recruitment and promotion, was leading to an unbalanced age distribution and depressed career prospects as well as to the loss of promising young graduates."[20]

The headmaster of Mellors Primary School in Red ford, Nottingham, Harry Stanton, offered another perspective:

> *Few people realize that since the war, the number of children leaving school with the qualifications to enter university has doubled every ten years. Standards, therefore, cannot be deteriorating. Of course, such a creaming off into the colleges and universities reduces the number of intelligent young people available to work in shops, offices, and industry. The need for labour is still there and the places have to be taken up by the less able. This causes consternation to the employers who start to complain about falling standards.*[21]

The conflicting political goals reflected in the British controversy surrounding writing surface more readily in their media than in ours. The problem is clearly seen as a power struggle between those who would further democratize education through an enhancement of the teaching of basic skills and those who would narrow educational opportunities by raising standards of attainment. Since levels of educational achievement are usually measured by levels of writing ability, the crunch always centers on the teaching of composition, even though this may not be explicitly stated:

> *...If the Tories won the next election, confronted with the obligations of office and the operation of the school system, no doubt a great deal of this tough talk would fade away. But why is it that the Conservatives seem unable to approach the schools without giving the impression that they think all those who work in them are lazy, left-wing layabouts? If the Conservatives have difficulty on the quality issue (accentuated, of course, by their other commitments to massive reductions in public spending and public employment which must, logically, mean many fewer teachers) so, too, does Labour. They find it difficult to talk about quality*

> *and high standards because they are afraid of sounding elitist. They, the political heirs of the grammar school, find it hard to project the quest for excellence alongside that of compassion and equality. And yet they, too, know that anxiety about basic standards has to be recognized. They have to face the political repercussions...no less than the Tories....*[22]

Those who advocate educational opportunity are exerting leveling forces; those who demand higher standards, ignoring the needs of the current ascending group, are bringing into play elitist forces. It's the age-old political tug-of-war. Everyone understands it and everyone is stymied by it: compassion versus competitiveness, quantity versus quality, literacy versus eloquence.

If we capsulize the concerns of the seven basics drives outlined in this chapter, a pattern emerges which suggests that all of them reflect a movement away from the broad expansion of educational opportunities and understanding and toward a narrowing of goals. The new direction involved either a practical thrust (adjustment to immediate minimal verbal needs) or an elitist emphasis (raising the level of complexity to produce fewer, but more technically skilled graduates).

BASICS DRIVE	MOVEMENT AWAY FROM	MOVEMENT TOWARD
1. The Preserving of Cheese; The nature of Manure; religious texts for primers	Imaginative, secular literature	Practical, economic needs, religious dogma
2. Matthew Arnold's "culture"	Social realities of late 19th century: Reconstruction, industrialization, huge influx of illiterate immigrants	A narrowly defined cultural base for disparate, disoriented subcultures; homogeneity of background
3. Science, efficiency, functionalism	"Vague high-sounding hopes and aspirations	Reduced cost; simpler and more current rules of usage

4. Anti-peace crusade of Depression Era	Social reform, political content	Form and style of language and literature
5. Academic Critics	Student-centered materials, life adjustment focus inspired by John Dewey	Rhetorical concerns, subject matter-centered curricula, emphasis on gifted students
6. "Back to the Basics", current outcry of late 70's	Social "relevance", student-centered materials, fluency, recognition of minority dialects	Grammatical conformity, rhetorical stance, higher standards of written English
7. Britain--70's	"Comprehensive" or open schools, compassion	Higher standards of written English, excellence

The current American "Back to the Basics" push derives its enormous vitality from the fact that it seems to combine both emphases, practical and elitist, to an astounding degree. It appears inevitable that the teaching of writing, like any discipline, must be subject to a certain amount of flux, from broad to narrowly defined limits, based on the social and political winds of change. Narrowly defined limits manifest themselves as the "basics" or minimum essentials of structure in language; broadly defined limits introduce all sorts of new concerns with the content of contemporary social issues. Narrow definitions remain the stable side of the discipline, which, if never challenged, become brittle, useless rules encumbering communication; broad definitions serve to re-vitalize stale conventions of usage with new infusions of social reality but which, if unchallenged, can diffuse into amorphous, even propagandistic avenues. Each swing of the pendulum brings certain necessary new perspectives which, once recognized, can be turned to advantage, injecting new life into a faltering routine. Apparently, the most dynamic approach

to the teaching of writing parallels that in the creation of art in general: it must embrace a keenly observed balance between the demands of form and content, aesthetic and social considerations, the respect for the past and the recognition of the present.

CHAPTER FIVE

Political Perspectives

Despite their toll, the most blustering of storms never fails to renew the earth: dead trees fall, cobwebs are washed away, new sprouts erupt into the sunshine. Major re-assessments are taking place in the colleges and universities which train and produce English teachers. With tightening budgets and declining enrollments, English departments, facing hard realities, are forced to become much more pragmatic in their attitudes. Some colleges seem to despair; others are caught up in the excitement of innovation. With the process of change comes much groping about: new directions are being vigorously sought in research. Amongst all of this, the students, objects of so much focus, simply are dreading the agony of confronting a hostile job market.

The first and most difficult step must be to acknowledge the existence of a real problem. When confronted with the necessity for adjustment, most people and institutions simply complain, wondering why the rest of the world has allowed itself to become so very out-of-sync. Most of the gripes now being brought forth center on the fact that composition is generally taught without conviction. Students readily observe a lack of commitment by colleges and universities to the teaching of writing and thus learn to de-value it as a discipline. Current employment practices in English departments bring the smallest rewards to those who are confronted with the bulk of composition teaching. Is it any wonder it is performed without joy, or even confidence?

It seems inevitable that the best students will continue to boycott and desert writing classes until a painful, undeluded inquiry into this problem takes place on the broadest possible scale. Gestures toward that kind of serious investigation gush forth from the pages of professional

journals these days. The question now is: how long will it take to convince those who, entrenched in their comfortable grooves, prefer to ignore the nature of this dilemma? And, when they do listen, will they be able to persuade the government and the public that real changes in teaching of writing are occurring? Finally, how long will it take students to unlearn the disdainful attitudes toward composition prevalent in English departments today?

Stunned by the naivete of her students toward the world beyond the university, Judity T. Gatlin of Queen's College, Charlotte, North Carolina, reminds her colleagues of their responsibility to offer students a larger perspective than presently is available to them:

> ...They know neither their own strengths not the strengths of the discipline...English majors should have been taught to write persuasively, logically, and concisely about complex ideas, to think imaginatively, metaphorically, and coherently. Yet these skills, needed and recognized within the business community, taught by the humanities disciplines, are not those that students recognize in themselves. They smile wanly when they mention their major and seem thoroughly inarticulate when asked to define their abilities. As entry-level hires of liberal arts graduates continue downward--they are off more than 50 per cent over a four-year period--and corporate recruiting emphasizes the narrowly trained individual, our students must be trained first to recognize the skills that they possess.[1]

When pressed, individuals and institutions must either learn to re-examine priorities or someone else will do it for them: this is the clear lesson of the current "basics" fight. In a major attack on the practices followed by English departments today, Gene Lyons, an established writer as well as a professor, assails the over-emphasis on literature which dominates the profession: "The business of the American English department is not the teaching of literacy; it is the worship of literature."[2] He expresses enormous contempt for the professors who fancy

themselves as nineteenth-century romantic artists. These creatures he labels "the most personally and socially destructive forms of life know to middle-class man."[3] He sees them as pompous hypocrites who primarily consume themselves: "The more perceptive students see such teachers less as dedicated practitioners of their disciplines than as persons whose good fortune it has been to convince the government or the trustees to underwrite their hobbies."[4]

He bases his wrath on the employment practices which are allowed to exist on most campuses. Citing the University of Texas as a typical example, he discusses the fact that 85 per cent of the freshman composition classes, and 50 per cent of the sophomore literature classes or, in total, 75 per cent of the department's classes, are taught by "teaching assistants" who receive a little more than one quarter of the salary budget. The full-time professors are thus freed to issue forth publications. Lyons goes into detail on the glut of articles being produced: about 10 per cent of those submitted actually get published. Of these, he quotes Edmund Wilson's observation on the Publications of the MLA, a periodical which "contains for the most part unreadable articles on literary problems and discoveries of very minute or no interest."[5] His radical solutions to the problem are motivated by a concern that "persons paid out of public funds to perform a task that society wants done be held accountable for it." These solutions particularly attack the notion that teaching freshman composition is a confession of intellectual inferiority:

> Funding can be cut off for useless and superfluous 'scholarly' publishing ventures; laws can be passed requiring that senior faculty teach certain number of basic courses in all disciplines; funding formulas can be altered, particularly in overcrowded fields, so that it stops being so profitable for universities to exploit underqualified graduate students as teachers in order to fatten departmental

> budgets. Job categories can be written that will allow faculty members to identify themselves and be evaluated primarily as teachers.[6]

One of Lyons' central points, the necessity for a redefinition of scholarship, is elaborated upon by Barbara Brothers, chairperson of the English department at Youngstown State University in an article entitled "Reeling and Writhing: Evaluation in Blunderland." She argues that the profession no longer has time for the self-indulgent dead ends that most publications today represent:

> There is validity to some charges made by critics of published research: some writing is poorly done, in part because the writer has fallen into the trap of writing for only the few who share his tiny universe and speak his 'Engfish'; and some of it has no value, because it is addressed to what can matter to only a few who are similarly seeking to address some obscurity and add another item to their bibliography.[7]

Instead, she suggests that scholarship should be re-defined as "inclusive of all serious learning activities that enrich teaching by the English faculty," such as faculty colloquiums in which colleagues share traditional research interests, and other materials and approaches in the teaching of literature. In order to avoid becoming a bastion of overspecialized dinosaurs, she calls on the profession to re-assess its elitist diet of training English majors to train more English majors, all of whom discover that "no one will hire them"[8]

Even more clamorous in his protests, James H. Sledd personally took it upon himself to explore the writing crisis as it evidenced itself at the University of Texas at Austin. He issued forth two questionnaires which were returned by 1,454 faculty members (about 48 per cent). Student responses numbered 2,484 (about 50 per cent). In order to prevent his

own bias from coloring the results, statistical work was done by the university's Measurement and Evaluation Center. Describing this reform attempt as one in which he felt it had been "like diving head first into a smothering mass of eiderdown," he minces no words about what he discovered: "Nobody can plant salt and harvest watermelons."[9] Primarily concerned with the abuses of the teaching assistant system, Sledd focuses on the fact that TA's hold only bachelor's degrees, generally have never taught before, and often work as composition teachers in the classroom a full twenty hours per week in addition to their duties as graduate students:

> Bad morale is not improved by the refusal of ranked faculty to accept TA's as genuine colleagues, by the knowledge that jobs are scarce for new MA's and Ph.D's in English, by the obvious willingness of regents and administrators to keep admitting more freshmen than there is money to educate, and by the general bland denials that anything is wrong.[10]

The attitudes of students generally confirm the bleakness of the picture. When asked how helpful freshman English had been for them, students responded as follows: very helpful, 206; moderately helpful, 447; slightly helpful, 483; not at all helpful, 394. The more advanced the composition class, the more dissatisfied the students became.

In trying to publicize his findings and generate a dialogue on the issue, Sledd discovered that "Kafka's world is Everyman's." In fact, the only people who would listen to him at all were legislators. Remarking that the only avenue to change appears to be through outside social and political pressure, Sledd concludes:

> Such pressure will not come through big business and its entrenched officialdom, which have been the principal agents in turning the universities into research institutes, or from the professional

> *societies, whose solemn troops can be counted on to defend the educational establishment. We are left with the appeal to undergraduates and their parents who pay high prices for a shoddy education; to the taxpayers at large, who want accountability; and to their tax-levying representatives (not government bureaucrats), who will act if the electorate demands it. We must look to the common people whom our mandarins despise.*[11]

With this sort of vehement energy behind a thrust for change, it will, despite firm resistance, undoubtedly come quickly. Dipping into the future, Fred L. Standley of Florida State University envisions the kind of world which will confront the profession for the next decade or so: unfortunately, it is a fearsome sight. He predicts continued fiscal constraints, even more intense competitiveness for appointments, promotion and tenure with increasing concern for job security, an extension of the suspicion that research in the humanities is frivolous, a surplus of Ph.D. recipients, a greater sense of laity hostility toward English teachers, crucial debates and conflicts over curricular offerings and degree requirements, and pressure to initiate off-campus courses and programs for non-traditional learners. On a brighter note, he also anticipates a sustaining of the recent surge of interest in writing as a component of English studies and a major duty of teaching, a greater distribution of women and minority faculty, and a maintenance of the present interest in English as a profession and in what being a professional signifies.[12]

Caught in the disparity between the past training of their colleagues and the present needs of their students, department chairmen are desperately trying to bulldoze new routes, hoping to provide leadership to their faculties who must now confront instead of the former dedicated English majors "hordes of cynical, apathetic, utilitarian-oriented students, many

of them semi-literate or pseudo-sophisticated, all of them products of the new technocratic culture committed to the hard disciplines and uninterested, if not scornful, of the liberal arts."[13] A chairman at Sam Houston State University, James Goodwin, calls on the profession to burst out their ivory towers and become alert to the needs of the communities they live in. In addition to the real needs of elementary and secondary school English teachers, adult education looms large as an avenue to explore: "In my judgment, faculty with the interest and ability to minister to the working population will be in great demand in the eighties. Spenserians will not."[14] Goodwin suggests that present faculty members branch out into such related areas as technical writing, advanced rhetoric, and so forth.

Richard Lloyd-Jones, chairman at the University of Iowa, emits a similar groan: "...we have let departments of special education, or journalism, or speech, or communication, or even creative writing teach the challenging activities of making things with language."[15] In addition, language-related subject matter that might have sustained English departments has already been usurped by the fields of linguistics, philosophy, religion and classics. Deploring the overemphasis on literature courses, Lloyd-Jones reminds the profession not to ignore a central part of their own universe: "The department should manage a curriculum which begins and ends in a concern for the nature of language, broadly defined and lavishly illustrated."[16]

This pressure for new stress on language and writing courses continues to mount in the face of a general pupular attitude that English faculties teach too few, too little, and too poorly. Virtually all observers of

the profession agree that the resurgence of interest in composition comes none too soon. However, occasionally one hears a plaintive voice defending the study of literature. Donald E. Morse, executive secretary of the College English Association and professor at Oakland University in Michigan, argues that, in the rush to provide English majors with a means to carve out a niche in the world, literature courses must not be allowed to become merely tangential elements of their education. An important part of economic survival is flexibility: what happens when too many writing teachers glut the market? Advocating that specialized careers quickly become overcrowded, Morse bespeaks the case for the traditional curriculum in view of the inordinate pace of change today:

> Studying imaginative literature helps a student by developing his ability to empathize imaginatively with others, to put himself or herself in new or unusual circumstances, to become free from a parochia dependence upon one environment, one job, one style of living....The result is the freedom to be oneself and the freedom to have not one but several possible careers.[17]

Out of all this hullaballoo, some specific recommendations emerge which point to the positive and practial solutions to the problem. Fred MacIntosh of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reminds the profession that for every section of literature being taught in post-secondary institutions, at least fourteen sections of composition are being required, or in other words, expensive graduate literature education is being financed by cheap composition teaching. He suggests two "fairly mild" changes in M.A. programs: 1) requiring a course in rhetorical theory and advanced expository writing, and 2) a seminar in problems of teaching and writing.[18]

Reiterating this fear that pragmatic America does not long support unsuccessful or unadaptive enterprises, Jerold J. Savory of Columbia College in South Carolina advises that English teachers become less prochial by opening up a dialogue with business and governmental employers. She recommends that students be taught skills in writing public relations materials, grant proposals, technical reports, journalistic and mass media productions. In addition, interdisciplinary courses should be explored, such as English and Political Economics, English and Physical Science, and English and Business Administration.[19]

Frank J. D'Angelo of Arizon State University provides the most comprehensive statement of "what to do now." Pointing out that the training that graduate students do have is very narrowly focussed on content rather than on the principles and techniques that inform everything they do, he devises several strategies to convince them that their work in composition will complement their work in literature. First of all, the historical context behind modern composition should be delineated: he lists all the rhetoricians from the classical period through today whose work can be brought to bear on the teaching of composition, outlining the rise and decline of different schools of thought. Much trickier, he admits, is the next strategy: discussing ways of relating literature and composition. On this most important and sticky problem, unfortunately, he waxes vague. He places strong emphasis, though, on the urgent need to allow the two disciplines to constantly inform each other. Such an approach will then change the negative attitude toward composition prevalent today. D'Angelo exhorts the profession to wake up to the genuine value of training in composition skills:

> *There is no loftier goal, it seems to me, than that of teaching our students to think clearly, to read critically and imaginatively, and to write effectively and forcefully.*[20]

The obvious conclusion to this series of recommendations and possible solutions to the writing crisis easily slips into place: the dynamic relationship between writing and literary skills must be researched, digested, formulated and taught--the sooner, the better. Perhaps, as a tangential benefit, composition classes might become more enjoyable and literature classes more useful.

CHAPTER SIX

The Future

Amongst all the tempestuous conjecture about who should teach what and why, very little is offered to those forlorn composition teachers who venture a question about how. Indeed, very little cold hard research has been conducted. Probably, the best materials are simply not available: teacher's journals, records of student conferences, staff evaluations, departmental memos on various related issues, and so forth. Since papers are returned to students, the raw data of research just doesn't exist. Furthermore, with the crushing workloads most writing teachers face, there remains little likelihood that longitudinal descriptions of progress or even systematic files will surface. What literature that does exist consists of articles and dissertations which concentrate on student needs and various programs and methods. In general, these have not been collected and made easily accessible to writing teachers. The teaching of the most complex and universal of human skills, verbal agility, rests on the most wishy-washy, promiscuous foundation of all: skimpy and dispersed research.[1]

Rushing to fill the void, text publishers have flooded the market with innumerable "how-to" books for teachers and students. Often the same publisher has brought out several different selections with competing emphases. Hit with the dispartity between the lack of available, cogent research and a tidal wave of materials which supposedly supply all the answers, the average writing teachers probably continue their most comfortable habits, that is, do what <u>their</u> English teachers had done, and try to modify their methods from that base.

Actually, the meager research which has been done on the relation of formal grammar to composition can be quickly summarized. There are

essentially four studies which bring together what is known on this subject. Before these existed, all studies dealing with traditional grammar focussed only on its practical application to usage and the data base consisted of objective tests rather than writing samples.

In 1962, a dissertation project done at the University of London showed that formal-grammar groups performed less well than other groups.[2] Despite the fact that many shortcomings were pointed out in this study, it is cited as the first to begin serious investigation into the value of formal traditional grammar. In 1964, the Bateman-Zidonis study appeared, demonstrating that students instructed in tranformational grammar improved significantly over students in a non-grammar class.[3] However, the area of improvement was only in sentence development and a mere four students accounted for all of the growth. Yet, like the 1962 study, the results were based on actual writing samples and studied longitudinally.

Janice Neuleib of Illinois State University rages over the oft-quoted conclusion based on the results of these studies: that therefore traditional grammar does not work and transformational grammar does. Noting that such a conclusion must be seen as overwhelmingly premature considering the sketchy proofs which were available, she hastens to add that of the later research that was conducted, very sparse evidence was produced which could allow for any definitive conclusions.[4]

In 1969, the Mellon study came out, verifying and clarifying the earlier results. It showed that transformational-generative sentence-combining practice will develop syntactic maturity for seventh-graders.[5] In a similar study conducted a few years later in New Zealand, however,

only small differences appeared on some minor conventions of usage among TG-instructed groups and these improvements were "more than offset by the less positive attitudes which they (the students) whowed toward their English studies." No grammar instruction seems to work just as well as any grammar instruction. The researchers concluded that grammar study should be excluded altogether from lower grades since it does no good and much harm by producing negative attitudes.[6] Thus, we have contradictory recommendations of a startling nature on the basis of a mere four studies. Yet despite the stark need for studies which duplicate and re-evaluate the existing evidence, very few universities now actively pursue exploration into this uncharted frontier. What are they doing? In 1973 alone, 457 publications on Shakespeare appreared.[7]

Robert C. Johnson, chairman of the English department of Miami University (Ohio) feels strongly that vigorous research into the teaching of writing is both the solution to the nationally perceived problem of increasing illiteracy and a means to revitalize and invigorate traditional departments of English. Indicting the entire profession for its blindness to the need for change, Johnson demands research into learning theory, psycholinguistics, educational theory, rhetorical theory, and communications theory: "To teach writing without knowing why we do what we do or without having an effective measure of what we have accomplished is a disservice to both ourselves and our students."[8]

Pointing out that the problem is one of attitudes within English departments, that research into writing issues has been at least déclassé if not an absolute disqualification for any serious academic respect, Joseph M. Williams, associate chairman at the University of Chicago, declares

that the perception of a writing crisis, whether or not it exists, is a good thing:

> Compared to what departments of mathematics know about the teaching and use of mathematics, our knowledge of the social uses of language is at a level only somewhat above plane geometry.[9]

In the darkness, some stirrings appear: at its 1976 convention, the MLA, for the first time, devoted an entire series of sections to the subject of research in composition. In February of 1977, the Great Lakes Consortium of Private Colleges met to discuss ways of re-distributing the teaching of writing throughout the entire faculty. The same month, Ivy League universities conferred on how to deal with the writing crisis. Since then, many more conferences have grappled with the issues.[10]

That real reforms are actually bursting forth becomes clearest when new graduate programs appear. On the Ph.D. level, provisions are now being made to train specialists in composition.[11] At Carnegie-Mellon University, a Doctor of Arts program has been developed which prepares college teachers whose major professional responsibility will be the classroom teaching of undergraduates. At CMU, that means 32 credit hours (or seven courses) are required plus a four-credit internship. Enrollment was limited to in-service teachers with a minimum of three years of teaching experience. In order to attract enough community college instructors (their primary target) they designed a program which could be completed within three summer sessions. Courses include such emphases as Literature and the Newer Media, Contemporary Narrative, Approaches to Composition, the Teaching of Reading to Adult Students. So far, after only two years, faculty and students alike report the program to

be deeply rewarding. There are now similar programs in Oregon, Iowa, Indiana and California (University of the Pacific).

More significant as a radical change in graduate training is the new Ph.D. now offered at the University of Virginia. Renaming their traditional Ph.D. as a degree in Language, Literature, and Research, the English department since spring of 1975 also offers a Ph.D. in Language, Literature, and Pedagogy. Four parts of the program are traditional: course work, foreign language, qualifying examinations and written essays. The fifth part, intern and full-time teaching experience, is new. Some of the new courses include Reader Response, Teaching Fiction, the Linguistics of Literacy, Black Literature for the Critic and Teacher. In describing the program as a "mild enough revolution" which "gives formal sanction to ideas that can no longer be denied," Harold H. Kolb, Jr. focuses on its benefits:

> The best ways to protect the frontiers of literary study is not to fence them off by creating separate departments of composition and isolated schools of pedagogy, but to merge them in the larger territory of the study and teaching of literature and language. The new Ph.D. program recognizes that graduate students must be educated as teachers as well as researchers, that there is no inherent contradiction between pedagogical training and excellence in literary scholarship.[12]

Obviously, the bottom line in this whole pandemonium is not the inadequacy of current statistical information on writing, or even the productive effects of allowing pedagogical concern equal weight in graduate training, but rather centers on the question of whether or not actual social needs are being met as a result of all this effort. If job vacancies no longer exist for holders of degrees in English, we are back at the literary society phase of the discipline's development.

Fortunately, the "Back to the Basics" movement has come along just in the nick of time to rescue faltering English departments: literate and not literary skills must be honed and polished if severe staff and budget cutbacks are to be avoided.

In my own survey of the job openings advertised in the Chronicle of Higher Education under the headings "English" and "Writing" from the beginning of January to the end of February of this year, I discovered some rather provocative information about what is happening in the discipline. Of 47 vacancies, 32 required composition specializations (almost 70 per cent). Eight of the remaining fifteen positions request someone who is prepared to teach freshman composition on a regular basis, i.e., every term. Only four (about nine per cent) demand specializations in literature alone. The other three openings are in children's literature, ESL and drama. Yet how many graduates are prepared to deal with this reality?[13]

Census projections predict that between 1981 and 1993, the size of the traditional college-age group will decline by 25 per cent. Thus the need and demand for Ph.D.'s will continue to decline. During the sixties, 184,000 doctorates were conferred and 270,000 new college teachers were hired. During the seventies, it is predicted that 365,000 new Ph.D.'s will be competing for about 150,000 positions. It is further estimated that during the eighties, if present trends continue, about the same number (365,000) of Ph.D.'s will be granted to individuals who will have to scramble for a mere 25,000 jobs. These statistics were offered by Allan M. Carter of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA to the participants of a Conference on Alternative Careers for Doctoral

Degree Recipients in the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts that was sponsored by the University of Michigan's School of Graduate Studies in October of 1975.[14]

Neal Woodruff, chairman of the MLA Advisory Committee on the Job Market, suggests that what is really going on is that the humanities disciplines have passed through an unusual period of inflated interest and "may now be moving toward having a smaller and more normally expectable share of student interest."[15]

Foreseeing that the battalion of disgruntled humanities graduates of 1975 will have swelled to an army by 1980, Robert A. Levy, Assistant to the Vice-President for Academic Affairs at the University of Tennessee, predicts a much more alarming state of affairs. He warns that because of doom-filled job prospects for graduates, the ranks of enrolled majors will be further decimated with the result that "we and our colleagues will join our students in a search for employment."[16]

Nonetheless, no one is folding up his tent or falling on his sword. In the summer of 1974, the University of Missouri English department started to conduct a survey of its recent graduates to determine what their work experience had been in a non-academic job market. They wanted to find out what changes should be made in the academic preparation of current students in order to ensure their maximum adaptability in a rapidly changing career environment. A fairly extensive survey which uncovered interesting responses, their questionnaires brought forth, among other things, thinly veiled hostility from the business community. The general attitude of businessmen was that time spent on

projects which do not yield immediate profits is time wasted. Students displayed great disillusionment; one replied: "...vocational matters should not only be a prime consideration, but even more, the prime consideration....Am I willing to pay for four years of satisfaction with my studies with forty years of dissatisfaction with my job?" The main points emerging from the survey, however, contained positive implications for change:

1. There is still a market for intelligence.
2. Careful reading and effective writing are salable skills.
3. Degree programs in professional writing are called for.
4. Sex discrimination continues although some women have broken through.
5. Most graduates of English have managed to obtain jobs of some sort.
6. English majors need to take more practical courses to acquire business-related skills.
7. Larger companies still hire generalists.
8. Career information centers are helpful in closing the gap between the academic and business worlds.
9. Placement bureaus are a necessary service.
10. English departments should provide more flexible curricula, more informed academic advising, and more realistic vocational counseling.[17]

Calvin Trillin addressed these "changes in the rules" in a thoughtful, provocative article in The New Yorker last year: "One of the most remarkable aspects of the job crisis in college English teaching is that most graduate departments of English still seem to be operating as if it did not exist--merrily turning out unemployed Ph.D.'s like a berserk

engineering school training regiments of specialists in the manufacture of buggy whips."[18] *Zeroing in on the attitude of the profession toward the rest of the economic world as the heart of the problem, this writer expresses surprise over the cautiousness of the MLA in dealing with non-academic employment. Trillin reports the observation of one participant at the New York convention of the MLA that the year's meeting consisted of 832 hours of the traditional scholarly discussions and seven and a half hours on "the problem of there being virtually no jobs open to scholars." As did the University of Missouri researchers, Trillin suggests that the profession has long since shut the door to one of the major areas of relief open to them, the business community with its need for verbally trained individuals:*

> *...most unemployed Ph.D.'s would rather scratch out a living as a part-time bookstore clerk or cabdriver than make a serious effort at a career in business or government. For eight years, after all, their standards of what is worthwhile doing for a living have been set by English professors. Even an undergraduate English major is likely to graduate from a liberal arts college with the notion that earning a living in commerce is mildly shameful. Four years in graduate school can only intensify the notion. Business, after all, is peopled largely by those who as students were not bright enough to go on for a Ph.D. in English.*[19]

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

In the recent controversy surrounding Proposition Thirteen, the Jarvis-Gann Initiative, to be voted on in June, Jarvis was being interviewed on KPFA radio when a listener called in to ask about the impact of the initiative's passage on the school systems. Jarvis admitted that, yes, schools would be severely crippled and thus changed by Proposition Thirteen. This, however, he advised, would not be such a bad thing: everyone knows that, whatever the schools do teach, it is not the fundamentals. Nobody can read or write these days anyway. Implying that what the schools really need is a good shake-up, he assured the listener that better and not worse education would result from staggering budget cutbacks.[1]

It is very possible that the thrust of the New Critics away from the "life adjustment" emphases of the thirties and forties may have gotten out of hand. Although the "relevance" focus of the late sixties and early seventies has compensated for much of their excesses and, in many ways, intensified their mistakes, their whole approach of separating themselves from the rest of society, concentrating almost exclusively on textual analysis without regard to such trappings as literary history and political context now appears to have backfired. If the teaching of writing is ever going to be seen as a serious intellectual challenge, the old intolerance of the non-academic world must be overcome: survival is at issue now.

Of course, many factors have played a huge part in the segregationism of elitist professors. The kinds of morally bankrupt ethics displayed by government during the Vietnam War and the Watergate episode have certainly appeared as ample justification for pulling the blanket over one's head inside the ivory tower. What's more, the behavior of

the business community in the face of environmental concerns and regulations and consumer gullibility definitely should come under intense scrutiny. Nevertheless, throughout all of their own defensive sputtering, they have pointed the finger of blame at the failures of the schools and universities, most significantly on the issue of literacy. Any major institution in this labyrinthine society must be closely evaluated from time to time: fraught with quarrels and crises, it stands to profit a great deal by outside challenges to its basic premises. Whether or not the Jarvises of this world are correct in their assumptions about the English teachers of this world, however, doesn't matter in the long run. Most significant is the fact that, for whatever reason, the profession is now viewed by the popular mind as self-serving, overpaid, blindly idealistic, and not doing the job they were hired to perform. The truly horrible reality is that critics at all levels can muster so many facts to support this contention.

One thing is certain. The suspicions and hostilities of the popular imagination will not abate unless major reforms within the profession become quite visible in the very near future. The Jarvis-Gann Initiative represents not only a reaching out for the simplicity of the past and a taxpayer's rebellion during a protracted economic squeeze but also an articulated attack (of which the "Back to the Basics" outcry was but the first indication) on the intellectual community of this country. If we are going to live through what promises to be an overwhelming onslaught, we had better get going. <u>As individual teachers</u>: we can put more emphasis on the style of writers,

discussing not merely overall structural devices but also the workings of smaller literary units, paragraphs and sentences-in technical terms. Once we have discussed how something works, the significance of its ultimate impact becomes that much more enhanced. Finally, a writer's style as well as ideas must be placed in an historical context. This approach takes more work but should be much more rewarding.

As departments of English:

1. We can expand the number of class offerings which stress writing skills, such as: The Evolution of Prose Style, Poetics, Language Analysis, Technical Writing, Approaches to Composition, the Rhetorical Art, Composition and Related Fields, Dialects and Composition, Script-Writing, Structure & Form in Non-Fiction Prose, Linguistics and Composition, Generative Grammar and Literary Style, Stylistic Investigations, the History of the Teaching of English, the Linguistics of Literacy, Reader Response, and Critical Writing.
2. We can also require, for completion of the major, more of these courses, placing equal emphasis on writing.
3. On the grad level, advanced courses of the same type should be required, including several on the Teaching of Writing.
4. In general, higher standards of written English should be maintained. Tolerance of sloppy, pedestrian, leaden, obscure style should be diminished.
5. Research into writing should not only be encouraged but immediately accelerated.
6. Colloquiums on the teaching of writing should be urged for all present English teachers.

7. The teaching of composition should be rotated on a regular basis amongst the entire department.
8. Teaching assistants should function as real teaching assistants, serving an apprenticeship rather than taking over the class.
9. The evaluation of non-tenured and tenured faculty should include strong emphasis on their willingness and skill to teach composition.

As a profession: we can organize many more conferences on writing and the teaching of composition. The MLA could wake up to the reality of the job market and offer more support to struggling unemployed members of the profession.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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APPENDIX ONE

AVERAGE S.A.T. SCORES

1966-1975

	Verbal	Mathematical
1966-67	466	492
1967-68	466	492
1968-69	463	493
1969-70	460	488
1970-71	455	488
1971-72	453	484
1972-73	445	481
1973-74	444	480
1974-75	434	472

Source: College Entrance Examination Board

APPENDIX TWO

YEARS OF SCHOOL COMPLETED OF PERSONS 25 YEARS OLD AND OVER BY RACE AND SEX: 1940 to 1970

United States Urban and Rural, 1970	Median school years completed
TOTAL	
1970- Male and Female	12.1
1960-	10.6
1950-	9.3
1940-	8.6
WHITE	
1970-	12.1
1960-	10.9
1950-	9.7
1940-	8.7
NEGRO AND OTHER RACES	
1970-	10.0
1960-	8.2
1950-	6.9
1940-	5.8
NEGRO	
1970-	9.8
1960-	8.2
1950-	6.8

(Total includes persons not reporting on years of school completed)

Source: United States Census Bureau

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